



**European Mediterranean Countries and the
Dynamics of Labour Migration in the Mediterranean Basin**

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Current structures and characteristics of labour migration in the Mediterranean basin started to be shaped in the 1980s. Ten years after the decline of flows originating in the southern shore, and even of existing stocks in countries such as France, the movement resumed as of the mid-1980s, rates of growth accelerating in the 1990s.

In the 1950s and until the mid-1970s, migrant workers, originating from North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula and Italy, essentially went to France, with some reaching countries further north. These workers were recruited in their own countries; if they arrived on their own initiatives they were also welcome, since they contributed with their labour to economic growth, based on industrial activity, and to the prosperity of receiving countries and their inhabitants. These guests, *guest workers* were called in Germany similar workers coming from Yugoslavia and Turkey, acquired legal documents and enjoyed the protection of immigration and labour laws. But the dynamics of labour migration in the Mediterranean basin start to change in the mid-1980s. Flows now go to Italy and Spain. They are made up of workers essentially intended for agriculture, construction and services of little value added, such as hotels and restaurants. No documents will be given to these workers. They are not required; no one asked them to come, is the explanation of this attitude. Thus, they will not benefit from the provision of immigration and labour laws. And they will become the undocumented migrant workers active in the agriculture and informal economies of European countries on the northern shore.

But the recent history of labour migration in the Mediterranean basin can be told differently. It is agriculture and the informal economy, mainly in construction, tourism and domestic work, which create demand for workers from developing and transition countries. And because agriculture and the informal economy are relatively less important in France than in Italy or Spain, flows of undocumented countries essentially went to these later countries. It is worth underlining that that the informal economy is mainly inhabited by national workers. An additional explanation is possible for the choice of these two countries as destination for the flows of undocumented workers. This is that the enterprise fabric in these two countries is to a great extent made up of small industrial and service enterprises and small agricultural holdings. The deficit in labour demand in countries of the southern shore, resulting from their development models, economic crises and structural adjustment programmes meant to remedy them, made meeting the demand of southern European Mediterranean countries possible.

The declared objective of labour immigration policies in European Mediterranean countries is to protect their labour markets, preventing undesired flows and sending back to their countries of origin, through incentives or by force, those already in their territories. Another objective, acquiring increasing importance, is to ensure a sound and sustained economic activity. The first version of the story entails a concentration of efforts in immigration policies, in other words in measures regulating entry and residence in



the concerned country. In labour market terms, only skilled workers for sectors and occupations whose demand cannot be met by national labour supply would be called in. Engineers and technicians in information and communications technologies and nurses, for example, would be welcome. However, these measures, whether of immigration or labour market policies, do not address what would be done with those economic activities that undocumented workers now exercise. In fact, these measures could not, in the past, and hardly can, in the future, achieve the declared objectives.

The second version presupposes the adoption of a different approach that would put on a par immigration and labour market policies. Under this version, both objectives above mentioned remain valid, but a further one should be added, that of establishing fair and competitive labour markets. In reality, ensuring the right to equality and non-discrimination for immigrants is the best way to preserve the competitiveness of national workers. Allowing that immigrants' labour costs be lower than those of nationals is undermining the opportunities of the latter in the labour market. Thus, measures such as the regularization of undocumented workers, guaranteeing respect for provisions on equality and non-discrimination, and family reunion can complement immigration measures, *stricto sensu*, to create the proper conditions for the effective protection of the labour markets of northern shore's countries. In addition, guaranteeing equality and non-discrimination would reconcile north Mediterranean countries with the principles of their own social and political systems. It is worth underscoring that that this is not the opportunity to discuss whether or not this protectionist scheme of labour markets is compatible with the current spirit of the international system, which extends liberalization to other segments of the international system, such as those of goods and services or of financial flows.

The objective of ensuring a sound economic activity requires a periodic identification of the needs of enterprises in terms of labour, highly or modestly skilled. These needs should be respected and entry and work permits in corresponding quantities should be issued. In past instances, relevant authorities arbitrarily reduced the number of permits requested by enterprises. In such a situation, the consequence cannot be other than the arrival of undocumented workers. And this implies ever more frequent regularization processes. In fact, repeated such processes are a forceful proof that policy is not adapted to reality.

Beyond immigration and labour market policy measures, macroeconomic and sectoral policies should also contribute to the realization of declared objectives. For example, measures for the modernization and mechanization of agriculture, including by changing crop structures, would contribute to reducing labour demand in countries of the northern shore. At the macroeconomic level, fiscal measures have to provide sufficient resources for sectoral modernizations. They should also make adequate allocations for services such as labour inspection.

Declared objectives should be matched with policy measures apt to realize them. Otherwise, the blame for policy failure could be placed on those who are not responsible for it. Tensions, suspicions and fissures would ensue between populations and countries. Coherence between statements and acts is the best way to guarantee that the *Mare Nostrum* play the function of bridge that it has essentially played over the centuries.